DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 663 CS 012 821

AUTHOR McClain, Veda Pendleton; Stahl, Steven A.
TITLE Standing in the Gap: Parents Reading with Children.
PUB DATE Nov 95
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (New Orleans, LA, November 29-December 2, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; Blacks; Grade 2; *Mother Attitudes; *Mothers; *Parent Participation; *Parent Student Relationship; Primary Education; *Reading Aloud to Others; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Processes; Reading Research
IDENTIFIERS African Americans

ABSTRACT

A study focused on the parent-child interaction and reading issues such as the correction of children's oral miscues, comprehension, and questioning techniques as the children and parents either took turns reading or as the parent listened to the child read orally from six multicultural selections. Subjects were four African-American second graders and their mothers, who were from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds in a small Southern city. Parents participated in the study because it had to do with reading and they thought it might help their child in some way. Data were collected over a 6-week period using phenomenological inquiry and inductive analysis. Results indicated that although each of these mothers had a different approach to reading with her child, each was successful--each child was on grade level and found pleasure in reading. For each family, learning to read and reading well was valued. The mothers were doing what the teachers expected them to do in helping their children with reading. (Contains 29 references and a table of data.) (RS)

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Veda Pendleton McClain

Steven A. Stahl

309 Aderhold

The University of Georgia

Athens, GA 30602

(706) 542-2718

Standing in the Gap:

Parents Reading with Children

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Running Head: Standing in the Gap

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Standing in the Gap: Parents Reading with Children

Studies of children's home environment have consistently found that the amount of support for reading in the home (resources, help from parents, time, attention, sensitivity,etc.) has a strong correlation with children's achievement. Sonnenschein, Brody,and Munsterman (1996) and Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) state that parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying the foundations for learning to read through fostering emergent literacy skills. The home environment that parents provide determines the amount of contact children have with print and the type of literacy activities children witness and participate in at home (Voss, 1993; Granowsky, Middleton, & Mumford, 1979). Wigfield and Asher (1984) and Coleman (1966) suggest that the influence of the home often outweighs the effects of the training given at school. Yet, many families are not aware of the magnitude of their influence on their child's achievement.

Edwards (1995, 1993, 1992,1991, 1989), in a series of studies, found that increasing parent's effectiveness in helping their children with reading improved the reading achievement levels of their children. Once the parents were shown how to incorporate activities that were parallel to those reading activities of the school, they were more effective in helping their children with reading. Snow, Goldfield, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) found that lower SES parents who were effective at working with their children were able to overcome poor or mediocre school environments.

Because of the importance of the home for reading achievement, teachers

often ask parents to support their reading programs, by reading with their children or providing other help. However, there is often a gap between what the teachers expect and what the parents actually do. There are a number of reasons for this gap. Often parents' own literacy skills are low, making it difficult for them to be effective in helping their children with literacy (Edwards, 1989). Even when parents are willing to help and able, they often do not know how to (Newman & Gallagher, 1994; Teale, 1986; Flood, 1977).

It is often recommended that parents read with children (Anderson et al., 1985). Parents reading practices may vary considerably, especially in how they respond to their child's miscue and how they question the child about the text. Different reading practices may be more or less effective in promoting reading growth and interest.

Studies have found that different procedures for correcting children's oral reading miscues have different effects on children's achievement and understanding of the reading process (McCoy & Pany, 1989). For example, correcting a miscue at the point of error is less effective than waiting until the end of a sentence or phrase, so that the child has an opportunity to self-correct. There are other areas that are less clear. Some people suggest that one should simply supply an unknown word, so not to interrupt the flow, and provide work on that word later. Others only provide corrective assistance if the miscue alters the meaning of the passage. Still others suggest that one can use the oral reading session to instruct children in the use of different cuing systems to identify unknown words (Clay, 1985).

Other studies have found that the questions that are asked during reading can also have a profound effect on children's comprehension. Wixson (1989) found that asking children a great many literal questions tended to focus their attention on details. When children were asked more inferential

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questions, they tended to better integrate the information in the text.

Rationale

Standing in the Gap evolved as a result of our interest in family literacy and because of the importance of parental involvement in the reading achievement of their children. We were interested in how parents and teachers perceive reading at home. Parental support and practices when engaged in oral reading episodes with their children were investigated. The study focused on the parent-child interaction and reading issues such as correction of children's oral miscues, comprehension, and questioning techniques as they read six multicultural selections.

Method

Participants. The participants were four African-American second graders and their mothers. They were from a variety of SES backgrounds. They were selected through solicitation from their second grade teachers. They attended school in a small Southern city. The school is located in a neighborhood containing poor and lower middle class families, although children were bused from other parts of the county to achieve racial balance.

Before any interviews were done, we met with the teachers and made them aware of our interests and concerns. They agreed to help by participating in a 15 minute interview and by sending home letters of solicitation. Of the 30 letters that were sent home to parents, only one was returned with an agreement to take part in the study. A second letter, less formal in nature was sent home. The results of the second letter were worse than those of the first.

Further solicitation was done. During that same school year, the first author had a child in second grade at the same school.She asked the help of her daughter's friends in this study. Thus, the sample of parents and children

is not random and does not represent any larger population.

The parents were willing to participate in the study because it had to do with reading and thought that it might help their child in some way. As will be discussed later, the mothers who participated in the study were from a variety of backgrounds and were all African-American. They ranged from a single mother on welfare to a wife of a Naval officer. Housing arrangements were equally as varied and so was socioeconomic status. Two were factory workers, one stayed at home, and one who had been a housewife became employed during the course of the study at a local crafts store. Only one had any college training (three years), but they all expressed the desire for their children to do better than they had done and go on to college. These mothers expressed the desire that their second grade children become good readers and learn to love reading. They also wanted their children to get a good education and do well in school.

Materials

The selections were chosen by the investigators and were of appropriate reading level for the children. The selections included: Ming Lo Moves the Mountain, Ollie Forgot, The Patchwork Quilt, Sleeping Beauty (An adapted African-American version), and Chicken Sunday. Three of the six books had African-American themes, one Asian theme, and two European themes. The selections were chosen by the investigators and were of an appropriate reading level for the second grade children who participated in the study, but each child chose the order in which the stories were read.

Procedures

Data were collected over a six week period using phenomenological inquiry and inductive analysis (Patton, 1990). We wanted to know what the structure and essence of these experiences were for these participants. We

wanted to know how these parents would describe their reading episodes with their children in relation to what they had been asked by their children's teachers to do.

Initial informal interviews were conducted with the parents. Background information was gathered on each participating parent as to their educational attainment, job status, leisure activities, and future aspirations for both the individual and the family. The question guiding these interviews was: how did the parents perceive and understand what reading with their child meant?

The interview began with an open-ended question --"What do you do when you read with your child?" Responses were probed to encompass parents' phenomenological views on the purpose and value of reading with children, what they perceived the teachers as wanting the parents to do at home with their children, the relative importance of accuracy and comprehension, what they presently read with their children, correction methods, and questioning techniques. Following the interview, meetings were held with the parent and child and videotaped as they shared reading experiences.

Teachers were interviewed using a parallel question format. The purpose of these interviews was to compare the perceptions of the teachers with those of the parents. This was done in an effort to find out if there was or where a gap might exist between what is expected to be done at home and what is actually done.

Analysis

The two sets of interviews --parents and teachers-- were analyzed using inductive analysis approaches (Patton, 1990). We looked for similarities and differences in the expectations and practices of parents and teachers. We also looked for various categories to emerge from the data as the participants

responded to and were affected by the processes of self-reflection and observation.

The reading sessions were analyzed in two ways. First, we examined separately the corrections of miscues and the parents' questions. Miscue correction was examined using standard categories taken from the literature, examining the relation of the miscue to the text, what types of miscues are corrected and which are not, the point of correction, and so on. Second, questions were analyzed using Raphael's (1982) QAR taxonomy. We were interested in whether the questions tend to be text-tied or whether they were more integrative in nature. Third, we examined the session holistically. We wanted to know what the interactions between parents and children would reveal about the parents' perspective on the reading process. We also wanted to know how the culture of the parents impacts their interactions with their children. Through our examination of the tapes and field notes, we attempted to characterize the process of reading with children. These data were triangulated with the information given in the interviews. Finally, member checks were conducted with the parents by allowing them to view the tapes. We shared our interpretations and their comments were added to the data set.

Because we were also interested in the effects of using multicultural literature, we conducted a separate analysis comparing the books using African-American themes with those using European-American themes. Specifically, we were interested in whether parents behave differently when reading books closely related to their own culture than when reading books from mainstream culture.

Teacher Expectations

In the teacher interviews, both teachers were asked the open-ended question, "What do you want parents to do with their children at home when you

tell them to read with their children?"

Teacher #1 was an African-American female who had previously been a teaching assistant for four years and had gone back to school to become certified to teach. She has had her own classroom for seven years and seemed to enjoy her teaching responsibilities. Her response was:

> It depends on the ability level of the child. The child who can read can simply read for pleasure. The average and low children need to read for practice each night. These children should be read to until they become comfortable with reading. I expect parents to ask them questions about the characters, and recognition skills, various strategies for reading, decoding, and word families.

Teacher #2 was a European-American male who was a university professor of Reading Education on leave to teach one year and collect data at this school as part of a research project on professional renewal. He had previously taught in public schools and had spent the past several years teaching reading courses at the local university. His response was:

> I'm not sure how what I've done this year will affect your study. I've sent home Coco and Bob (two stuffed animals with book pouches) with reading instructions on different reading strategies for the parents to use when reading with their children. The parents of my students have been doing this all year.
>
> What I mainly want parents to do is to spend time with their child--provide them with an opportunity to read and to be read to. There should be a dedicated time for reading and I expect the parents to provide the necessary support.

(He went on to talk about other reading strategies and activities that he had

implemented in the classroom and how a number of his students who had been nonreaders at the beginning of the year were now readers.)

He said, " All of my students can read books now, but they still need support."

As we reviewed and reflected on the content of these interviews, we realized that these two teachers professed two different approaches here to reading with children. Teacher #1 focused more on task oriented activities and skills. She seemed to be interested in the children getting more out of the content. She wanted the practices of the home to focus on skills until the child reached a certain level of proficiency. Teacher #2 focused on the support from home, not just for a season, but more long-term in nature. He seemed to want for his students an immersion in reading and literature. While these teachers expressed differing perceptions of what they wanted parents to do with their children as they read with then, both approaches can be successful in helping children with reading at home.

Parent-Child Interactions

The study focused on the parent-child interaction as they either took turns reading or as the parent listened to the child read orally. Reading issues such as correction of children's oral reading miscues, comprehension, and questioning techniques were noted as they read six multicultural selections.

Ruth and Natasha. One working mother and single-parent was an avid reader with an extensive collection of books by African-American authors. She also spent time and money in helping her young daughter choose and purchase books of her own. Ruth said, "I try to expose Natasha to as many different authors as I can. I want her to see what's out there so that later on she can make good choices for herself. This mother had other varied outside interests

such as church activities, painting and collecting figurines, and attending African and African-American cultural events in the surrounding areas. As a result of the mother's interests and participation in these activities, the daughter was exposed to a variety of settings and had the privilege of having her horizons broadened. Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) found a strong correlation between family organization and gains in language and reading based on the frequency of outings with adults. Of the group of children who participated in the study, this child was the most confident in her abilities to participate in reading activities with her mother. She was always eager to sit with her mother and read for it was a time of warmth and affection which made reading episodes even more enjoyable (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1995; Bloom, 1976). In the initial interview, the mother stated that they often read together at night. First, the mother would read to the daughter, and then each would read her own book for pleasure until bedtime. At other times, they would cuddle together in bed and share books. For them, reading together was a common occurrence which made the reading episodes that I witnessed comfortable and pleasurable experiences for both of them. It was an important ingredient in their daily lives (Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996). Chall et. al (1990) also found that the mother's interest in and achievement in literature were significantly correlated with reading development.

When correcting miscues, Ruth would tell Natasha, "Uh-uh! Read that again." She would also supply words when necessary. Ruth's questions were cogent, capturing the essence of the story. In Blueberries for Sal, for example, her first question centered around why they had to pick so many blueberries now for a later time. She also asked her daughter why the bear could eat as many blueberries as he wanted, but not Sal. Question such as these prompted her daughter to think beyond the text.

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Elizabeth and John. This Naval's officer's family was rich in literate experiences. They had moved several times and were preparing to move again. The children had become accustomed to traveling and seeing new sights. The family lived in a modest home in a middle-class neighborhood. The paternal grandmother also lived in the home. The mother, who was the primary caregiver and who stayed home during most of the study, was constantly engaged in conversation with them and it was obvious from their questions and her responses that talking together was a common occurrence for them and one from which they gleaned much information. As I witnessed some of these conversations, I noticed how the mother took the time to explain the smallest detail in ways that the children (ages six and seven) would understand. I later witnessed the children in a different setting using some of the same vocabulary that the mother had used with them. These children were articulate and were not shy about asking questions of you if they did not understand.

It was evident that books were present in the home and that reading books together was a valued experience. It was a time of closeness and warmth for they sat extremely close to the mother as she read to and with them. Books were emphasized in this family as source of enjoyment and entertainment (Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996; Wigfield & Asher, 1984). Elizabeth said, "I want the children to learn to enjoy reading books and to let them know that they can go anywhere and be anything they want through reading books." Pleasure was to be found between the covers of each book that they shared and the children waited in anticipation for their mother was often dramatic in the ways in which she shared stories with her children. She often acted out parts of the stories as in taking steps backwards in Ming Lo Moves the Mountain.

While listening to her young son read, the mother focused on fluency

and incorrect words only when the meaning of the passage was changed. She had him to reread passages and reminded to read fluently by saying "rhythm". As John completed each page, she praised his efforts and let him know when he had done an excellent job. Elizabeth's questions centered around whether or not John enjoyed the book. He always had to tell what he enjoyed most and why he enjoyed a particular passage. This activity encouraged John to think beyond the pages of the book and come up with the 'in your head' responses.

The younger child, although not the focal child in the study, was eager to share her books with me and wanted me to observe and videotape her also as she read with her mother. On more than one occasion, I had to oblige this child. Although in kindergarten, she was already reading books by memory, an important emergent literacy skill.

Mary and Marcia. The most proficient reader of the children involved in the study was the child of the mother on welfare. This mother had been the only parent to return the letter of solicitation and signed permission form. The family lived in a run-down trailer on the outskirts of town where drug deals were an everyday occurrence in the neighborhood. When I arrived at the home for the first visit, the mother was cleaning the kitchen and sprinkling boric acid to kill some of the many cockroaches that infested the home. The walls of the trailer were thin and often the loud music from cars parked outside would shake the walls, the video camera, and the cameraperson. The mother, who had two school age daughters, had hopes of getting her youngest daughter into a preschool program the following year and attending a local technical school herself to study cosmetology. She felt that she needed additional education if she was to change the standard of living for her three daughters. Mary said, "I've got to do better for me and the kids. I want more for them. And I want them to do well in school."

While having been identified by her classroom teacher as a 'not so good' reader at the beginning of the school year, this child had made significant gains in reading. While not knowing exactly what to do to help her child with reading, this mother had taken some of the many suggestions from the teacher and implemented them at home to help her daughter with her reading. The mother was able to articulate some of the activities that she had engaged in with her daughter such as choral and repeated readings. She also talked about how she tried to help her daughter sound out unfamiliar words, but admitted that it was sometimes easier to just go ahead and tell her the word. When the child made mistakes in reading, the mother reminded her to slow down and take her time. The mother would often supply words that she anticipated would be too difficult for her daughter. Martha was also effective in her questioning of her daughter after each reading session. While focusing most of her questions on content, she did ask inferential questions in efforts to make her daughter think beyond the pages of the selections. This help from home had paid off. The child had become a good reader and at times during the study seemed to be a better reader than her mother. The child seemed to be more familiar with the language and text of the stories that they read and therefore, read them with more expression. This mother proved that her limited income, living situation, and marital status had nothing to do with the literacy achievement that her daughter to date had attained. The activities that she was willing to engage in had nothing to do with money, but rather with the values she had as a mother, including time, attention and sensitivity to the needs of her children (Mavrogenes, 1990).

Rachel and Sara. The fourth mother in the study worked different shifts at a local dairy. Her schedule meant that many times she was either

not home or awake to help her daughter with school work. (Scheduling visits with this family was often difficult.) She did, however, take advantage of every opportunity she had to work with and spend time with her daughter. She viewed reading as a necessity if her daughter was to be successful in this world and wanted both of her daughters to go on to college. When speaking of her two daughters, she said, "Sara and Sheila can do better than I did. They do good in school. I don't want them working like I do."

During the reading episodes, the mother focused on preciseness in word identification and constantly reminded her daughter by saying "take your time now" and "call your words." Rachel wanted Sara to pronounce every word exactly right because she feared some of the meaning would be lost if she did not get every word. Reading for this family was viewed as a tool needed in everyday life -- a functional asset. Rachel's questions focused on details found in the story and often were not inferential in nature.

Book Choices

Of special note in this study was the effect of the book choices on the interactions of the parent and child. Of the four mothers, only one had previously seen more than one of the selections. None of them had read the black version of Sleeping Beauty, but that was the first choice of three of the four children. The parents expressed delight in that such culturally relevant selections were now available for their children to read and enjoy.

Discussion

While each of these mothers had a different approach to reading with her child (see Table 1), each was successful. Each child was on grade level and found pleasure in reading. For each family, learning to read and reading well was valued.

Parent comments after viewing the tapes of themselves centered around

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the lack of perfection in the reading sessions. They discussed how they looked, the interruptions that occurred, and the way the child either sat or performed. They viewed their part in the session as accurate and consistent with what they said they did as they read with their children.

What was found in this study was that these parents were doing what the teachers expected them to do in helping their children with reading. They were spending time with them and giving them an opportunity to read and to be read to. They were questioning the children at all levels and challenging them to think beyond the pages of the text. They did focus on word recognition skills, decoding, and other strategies for reading (looking at pictures, rereading, looking at nearby words, predicting, etc.) They did what the teachers wanted them to do without knowing specific strategies to employ.

For these families, there was no gap in which to stand. We were happy to find such results. Much is written about why families and children are not successful in reading (poverty, living in a single parent household, lack of support, low literacy skills of the parent, etc.) and what families with such demographics are doing wrong. This study highlights four African-American families with a variety of differences who are all working positively in reading with their children.

The children were all succeeding in reading, partially because of the support that their parents provided. Mary, Ruth, and Rachel were not highly educated and were single parents. Yet, all three women were able to provide strong support for their child's literacy growth. Ruth, through her interest in African-American literature provided a literacy environment superior to those of many households with more material resources available. Although Rachel's schedule made it difficult to schedule literacy interactions, she

made the effort to do so, out of a belief that it was important. This belief was shared by all four mothers, and motivated them to provide a rich literacy environment for their children.

We do not claim that these women are typical of all African-American, single, working class, or poor parents. But there are a significant number of parents who place a great deal of importance on literacy. It is easy to lose sight of these parents in face of the stereotypes of poor African-American single parents. These parents have a "high literacy press" (McClain, 1996). They value reading. It is the presence or absence of such a press, rather than a set of demographic categories that leads to improved reading achievement. A strong literacy press compels these parents to overcome obstacles (lack of material resources, lack of time) to provide a quality literate environment.

Table 1

Characteristics of Parents and Children

Parent	Child	Occupation	Education	Reading Focus	General Characteristics	Correction Pattern
Ruth	Natasha	Factory Worker	High School	Relaxation/ Quiet	Questions brought out points well	Word Recognition
Elizabeth	John	Housewife	3 years college	Entertainment	Entertainer	Meaning based
Mary	Marcia	Unemployed	High School	Task Oriented	Supportive	Flexible
Rachel	Sara	Dairy Worker	High School	Decoding	Accuracy	"Call your words"

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